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# The Documentary Management of a Strategy for Skills Training in Ontario

**End-of-project report**

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## I. Introduction

This is the end-of-project report on "The Documentary Management of a Strategy for Skills Training in Ontario". The study focused on the relation between the Ontario Skills Development Offices' (OSDO) training strategy and personnel practices of firms in the plastics industry. It is the second of three studies investigating the documentary management of the job-training nexus. The earlier study investigated the development of a DACUM training profile for "plastics technician". The third in the series is concerned with the development of a plastics training centre administered by the industry's trade association. This study focused on the effect OSDOs training strategy has on personnel practices of plastics firms.

The research design located this investigation as a study of textually-mediated social organization. Of particular interest was the role documents play in the organization of managerial relations. The design itself took the form of an institutional ethnography which involved collecting data in the form of interviews and documents at a number of OSDO and industrial sites.

This study has had a number of successes and has encountered one or two very instructive problems. First of all, it has involved the development of field research with a number of plastics firms in Ontario. Access to the industry has not been easy. Secondly, it has involved significant additions to the pro-

jects data base, especially as it relates to the management of plastics plants. Thirdly, it has provided an opportunity to become familiar with the various technologies and managerial strategies used in the plastics industry. Lastly, it has involved dissemination activities including academic conferences, and a year-long seminar on textually-mediated social organization. The purpose of this report is to detail these accomplishments as well as to review some of the difficulties encountered in undertaking this project.

## II. Work Accomplished

### 1. Entry to the Field

The present proposal was eventually funded for 10 rather than 12 months. the field work, consequently, was initially restricted to investigating 2 rather than 3 plastics firms. The original proposal involved 5 firms over two years. As it turned out, however, five plants were studied in ten months. Nonetheless, it was impossible to find small owner-managed plants to include in the study. Part of the problem was to locate such plants and another was to convince the owner/managers to take valuable work time to participate in an interview. Of the 5 firms studied 2 had developed OSDO training plans.

In addition to personnel at plastics plants, interview data was also collected from individuals working in Ontario Skills Development Offices. In these instances, in particular, copies of relevant OSDO documents were added to the current store of documents in the project's data base.

## 2. Data Collection

During the course of this research, the collection of data has proceeded apace. Roughly 75 hours of taped interviews have been added to the data base. And, as mentioned earlier, a number of document have been collected including government forms, company and product brochures, trade publications etc. In some instances we were able to tour plants and see at first hand how work is organized in medium-to-large size plastics factories. As the research has matured over the course of the project, we have begun to focus more carefully on the managerial strategies and technological constraints defining skills training needs of plastics companies. In this context, we also consulted extensively with an engineer consultant to the Society of the Plastics Industry who is designing curriculum materials for the proposed training center. The data collection planned for this research has now been completed.

**3. Data Processing and Analysis**

The work of data processing consisted of two stages: first, the transcription of the audio tapes, and secondly, keyboarding the transcription into a text-based information storage and retrieval system. Tapes were transcribed unto computer disks and hard copy printout were produced and stored in three-ring binders. Nota Bene word processing software was used to set up a data base that could be indexed and recovered using keywords. Because of changes in staffing the project, the work of transcribing the tapes has proceeded much more efficiently than in the first phase of the project.

Bi-weekly project meetings took place over the ten months of the project. These meetings were given over to planning and to the analysis of the data. The contact with plastics firms increased our awareness of the ways in which technology and management styles shape the issue of training needs, and ultimately the kinds of training that are required. Our interest in the analysis of the data, consequently, became more focused on the interviews with personnel managers.

As is the case with most qualitative forms of research, a considerable amount of time was expended on the development of a method of work for analysing the data. As the analysis developed, a new approach to determining training needs emerged that is dis-

tinctly different from the traditional methodology employed, for example, by the Ontario Manpower Commission.

This approach to the analysis of training needs should provide an important linkage between the first phase of this study of the job-education nexus, the development of DACUM training profiles, and the last phase on the construction of a training center for the plastics industry.

**4. Background research**

Background research has been conducted in a number of areas: the history of technological innovation; methods of determining training needs, especially in the plastics industry; transformations in management strategies; comparative studies of Japanese industry; and studies of the labour process. As well, materials continued to be collected on current developments in the social organization of knowledge.

This work has added to the gradual accumulation of background materials related to the documentary management of the job-education nexus.

**5. Dissemination and Collaboration**

As mentioned earlier, a bi-weekly seminar concerned with the social organization of knowledge was held in conjunction with

this research project. It provided an opportunity to discuss the analysis and findings of this study as they developed.

Two Papers have been completed so far, and two or three more are in the planned stage.

> Dorothy E. Smith "Literacy, Business and the 'New Management'" Occasional Paper No. 4, the NEXUS Project. Forthcoming in Issues in Education and Culture
>
> Dorothy E. Smith "Determining Training Needs: Training needs contexts in the plastics Industry" Occasional Paper No. 5, the NEXUS Project.

Discussions have been opened with David Wolfe, of the Department of Political Science U of T, on the impact of technology on the management of the labour market and on the work process in firms that are automating their production process. A presentation of this discussion is tentatively planned for next June during the bi-annual conference on Workers and their Communities

Discussions are ongoing with a proposed "Network of Centres of Excellence" on the Development of Human Competence for the Advancement of a Technological Society. The consortium includes research centres across Canada investigating literacy,

competency, and the relation of these concerns to the requirements of a new technological environment in industry.

## II. Findings

The examination of the training needs of the plastics industry provided a new basis for understanding contemporary concerns about "literacy" in the work force. Currently, literacy has been taken up as a requirement of the new forces of production--i.e., new technologies requiring new skills etc. Rather than seeing literacy as being simply technology-driven, this research deflect attention from the apparently obvious "different machine: different skills" relation, to the less obvious but rather more pervasive elaboration of the textually-mediated organization of capital coordinating workplace and production process with the financial organization of capital accumulation,

The study of training needs in the plastics industry has also resulted in a proposal for a radical change in the methods of assessing these needs. Historically, training needs have been accounted using a survey instrument based on a demand-and-supply framework. Training needs within this context are identified in terms of "positions" to which skills are attached. The alternative formulation is to see training needs as arising in the everyday operation of a company where the management of the production process is seen by management to involve problems to be solved by "adding" the training of employees (workers or manage-

ment) to the operational mix. Training needs, in other words are not deficiencies in skills that could be identified with categories of workers independently of the management and operation of the company.

## III. Conclusion

"The Documentary Management of a Strategy for Skills Training in Ontario" investigated the ways in which a government program, Ontario's Training Strategy, coordinates personnel practices in the plastics industry. The first part of the study concentrated on how plastics firms define their training needs. The second part looks at how these needs are articulated to the province's training strategy. The analysis of the latter process is still underway and will be carried into the third part of the project, a study of the development of a training center for the plastics industry. These findings are forthcoming in two papers that are in addition to the two papers already produced.

The first part of this research project, "The Documentary Management of the Job-Education Nexus" investigated the work of government in producing training profiles for occupations in the plastics industry. This second phase, on a strategy for skills training, focused on the work of Ontario Skills Development Offices and the operations of personnel management in plastics firms. The next stage will examine the work of the plastics industry in putting together a training center. Each phase of the

project is linked in this way to the overall strategy of studying the documentary management of the job-education nexus.